Old Worlds, New Travels

Jack London's *People of the Abyss*, Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, and the Cultural Politics of Travel

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Although we may not immediately think of Jack London and Ernest Hemingway as travel writers, like many well-to-do Americans of their respective eras, they were travelling much more than their parents' generation had, and their writing is indelibly marked by these experiences away from home. London's forays, especially north to Alaska and the Yukon, but also to ports of call in the Pacific, were undertaken at the height of the American imperial era, and his writing sometimes echoes the discourses of empire. A generation younger than London, Hemingway's famous expatriate cosmopolitanism is marked by what Ford Maddox Ford dubbed the "habit of flux," the quintessentially modernist mode whereby the artist seeks the shock of exile to see one's own culture more clearly.[1] In this essay, I argue that by reading London and Hemingway together as travel writers, we can elucidate the rapidly shifting cultural politics of travel and tourism, as well as their respective impacts on the way Americans would come to think of travel in the twentieth century and beyond.

In many ways, London and Hemingway offer a study in contrasts. This is perhaps most obvious in their outward political stances, as London's avowed socialism could easily be juxtaposed to Hemingway's calculated apoliticism. Despite their obvious differences, however, when it comes to engaging with the cultural politics of travel of their respective eras, the two famous authors share much in common. Notably, I will suggest, both London and Hemingway

travel with what we might call class anxiety. While their avocation as writers was not necessarily recognized as working class labor, they both nevertheless emphasize their links to the workers they encounter on their travels, going to great lengths to both establish a writerly ethos in which they connect with local labor culture and to justify writing itself as work. Through readings of London's *The People of the Abyss* (1903), his treatise on poverty among the laboring classes of London's East End, and Hemingway's novel *The Sun Also* Rises (1926), I suggest they offer important and timely interventions in the way the nascent leisure travel industry and Americans in general framed their experiences abroad.

These might seem like odd texts to choose when thinking about London and Hemingway's respective impacts on travel, given the authors' famous globetrotting. Despite travelling to exotic lands—London sails his 55-foot ketch the *Snark* across the Pacific, for example, while Hemingway follows in Teddy Roosevelt's imperial footsteps and goes on two big-game hunting safaris to Africa—their interventions in the travel narrative genre happen most dramatically when they are writing about Old World experiences. Because American travel conventions were (and frequently remain) inextricably tied to forays to Europe, focusing on London and Hemingway's critiques of the social class politics inherent to standard Grand Tour narratives perhaps best reveals their respective impacts on broader national perceptions of travel.[2]

As Judith Hamera and Alfred Bendixen note in their introduction to the *Cambridge Companion to American Travel Writing*, Americanness is intricately tied to mobility. For example, popular conceptions hold that we are at once a nation of immigrants and a restless population on the move. On the one hand, the American democratic experiment is tied to a radical openness to immigration, as the lines from Emma Lazarus's sonnet inscribed on the

Statue of Liberty suggest: “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” Despite contemporary xenophobic political rhetoric to the contrary, these ideas form core components of our national identity. On the other hand, travel lies at the heart of another core American ideology, that of Manifest Destiny. Mobility is essential to the idea that settlers should exercise their divine right to spread American institutions Westward and beyond. We continue to see American travel ideals replicated in more commonplace advertising rhetoric about cars, in various migration narratives, even on the license plates of my home state, which declare Alaska to be “The Last Frontier.” In these and many other ways, Americanness is intricately tied to mobility, and mobility makes the most sense if we can tell stories about it. Travel writing has thus helped define, reflect, and construct American identity. To put it another way: as travel texts simultaneously construct the traveler, the nation, and the shared cultural experiences of the audience, American identity comes into sharper focus in the stories. In so many of these contexts, moreover, Europe offers the dialectical opposite of the new nation, serving as both origin and the example of what to avoid.

Both London and Hemingway came of age when ideas about travel and nation were increasingly contested, especially in in relation to trips to the Old World. While arguably a tradition of an earlier era, in certain American circles in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth century, the Grand Tour was still thought to be integral to an elite education. Originally a British tradition for wealthy men, this extended itinerary on the continent served as a key rite of passage for young Americans too, especially as it was thought that the new continent was culturally thin. Prominent writers who influenced London and Hemingway affirmed this belief. Henry James is perhaps the most prominent example, as he crafted dozens of tales of Americans crossing the Atlantic to engage the masterpieces of Western Civilization and connect with aristocrats, artists,

and intellectuals. As they find connections to the sophisticated cultural milieus of England, France, or Italy, James and his characters come to terms with their own national identity.

Notably, as transportation technology advanced and travel became easier in the second half of the nineteenth century, the Grand Tour's elitism began to break down. As the cost of entry made it more accessible, the travel circuit was no longer a sure-fire way to find like-minded compatriots. James and others explore the emergent class conflict extensively, but frequently figure Europe nostalgically, emphasizing the Oldness of the Old World in contrast to the less sophisticated sensibilities of Americans, especially the nouveau riche of the rising industrial classes. Travel accounts became the medium to push back against mass tourism, as writers attempt to differentiate true authentic "travel" from commercialized tourism.[3]

Both London and Hemingway are acutely aware of these cultural tensions. Their choice of destinations as well as their styles of travel are marked by an awareness of the problem of authenticity inherent to travel in the era of emergent mass tourism. More importantly, as I will suggest below, their work offers further interventions into these travel tensions, adding an even more acute sense of class consciousness to the mix. Instead of nostalgia for a static Old Europe, in other words, they figure Europe as connected to larger global politics, carving out new cultural space for American travelers and tourists alike.

London's London

By most accounts, London's *The People of the Abyss* belongs to the tradition of sociological urban studies rather than travel writing. To be sure, London found himself in the center of the British Empire for work, not leisure—and by chance, not design. En route to South Africa to cover the Boer War for Hearst's newspaper syndicate, when London's ship landed in England, the conflict had already ended. Without a commission, he sought his own story. Familiar with

Jacob Riis' *How the Other Half Lives*, the crushing 1890 exposé about working class laborers of New York, London set out for the desolate center of poverty found in London's East End to "see things for himself" (4). What he sees is atrocious, and his brutal account remains an important historical document. As Richard Stein notes, however, the book is at best an uneasy entry into this urban studies genre. Addressing the book's prominent use of the first-person pronoun, Stein suggests the book "is the story of London in London—his adventures, his hardships, his resiliency, his politics, his pleasure at being able to escape the worst poverty he describes and return to write in comfortable rooms" (590). While Stein turns to London's photographs to argue that we read the book as an unorthodox intervention in the urban expose narrative structure—suggesting we call it "socioautobiography" (590)—I want to suggest the frame of the narrative clearly signals his effort to engage with travel writing conventions as well.

London's first-hand account of living and working amongst the down-and-out urban poor indeed opens with a visit to the world's most famous travel agent. The tongue-in-cheek send up suggests that he's interested in calling out the class politics of the travel industry: "But O' Cook, O Thomas Cook & Son," he writes, "path-finders and trail-clearers, living sign-posts to all the world, and bestowers of first aid to bewildered travelers—unhesitatingly and instantly, with ease and celerity, could you send me to Darkest Africa or Innermost Thibet, but to the East End of London, barely a stone's throw distant from Ludgate Circus, you know not the way" (7). Invoking the apostrophe form, London's comic exchange with the bewildered travel agent serves to establish his own travels as different from the mass tourist's, while also emphasizing the danger inherent in his efforts to connect with the city's working class. The exchange—in which the travel agent labels London's idea as "unusual" and "unprecedented," concluding that he can't help the author make it to East End—also serves to question the colonial implications of

traditional travel. Noting the ease with which English tourists are escorted to distant lands, London suggests that they could easily find these same exotic Others living nearby in their own city. Repeatedly labeling both the living conditions and the people the ruthless environment creates as "savage," London specifically challenges the prevailing idea that London, the city, is the center of the civilized world. Interestingly, he does so by maintaining his subject position as American, and in particular as American traveler.

True to the travel genre, London contrasts his experiences abroad with his experiences at home, referring to American contexts to understand what he is seeing. As Robert Peluso argues, in fact, London's sharp critique of British industrialism's impact on workers "reveals a production of knowledge deeply indebted to a number of fundamental American values and meanings," ultimately serving, as he puts it, to "legitimize a rapidly developing American imperialism" (55). In Peluso's excellent assessment, London's immersion in the bowels of British industrial capitalism is marked by efforts to distance himself physically and ideologically from the subjects of his book.

The complexity of this rhetorical framing is perhaps most notable in terms of London's clothing. As part of his style of immersion journalism and travel, London adopts a disguise to attempt to blend in with the surrounding culture. Although London is famously from very modest means and, when he visited London he is only on the verge of his fame as successful American writer; from 1900 onward, he was able to make a decent living through his writing. Taking advantage of the nation's seemingly insatiable appetite for hard-hitting newspaper and magazine articles and adventure stories, London frequently turned his keen political eye toward social inequity. To do so in London, however, the author needed a disguise, as his dress would mark him as an outsider. Trading his comfortable and well-made clothes for "rags," London is

instantly “impressed by the difference in status,” finding that he “now shared with them a comradeship,” outwardly connected to his new “mates” on the streets (12). Significantly, London’s disguised identity stops short of a full immersion, as he adopts the habits of an out-of-work American sailor. London’s experience as an oyster pirate no doubt gave him access to key parts of this identity, but as an author he’d already moved past the hand-to-mouth existence of itinerant seafaring laborer. He wants to pass as working class, but not as English. The standard travel narrative arc requires returning to one’s home identity, retaining elements of one’s own culture so as to connect to an audience at home, and to ensure that reintegration remains possible. To mark his own distance and make this connection with his American audience, London is careful to frame his own sense of national superiority as well. Indeed, under the tattered British rags he wears as a disguise he retains his “new and warm” American underclothes and socks, declaring them “the sort that any American waif, down in his luck, could acquire in the ordinary course of events” (11). The implication here, of course, is that even the down-and-out in America have it better than they do in England.

Similarly, while London does spend several nights on the street and in various relief organization shelters, he also rents a writing “oasis” on a respectable East End street from a middle class British detective. While he appreciates the refuge, he also pauses to note the residence would be “considered very mean in America” (15). This retreating to his American superiority time and again allows London, as Peluso puts it, a “safe haven from which to ‘know’ the East End poor,” adding that “he can view their misery, comment on its horror, and at the same time remain uncontaminated by it” (59).[4] For Peluso, this is how London, always sensitive about his own relationship to poverty, marks his and his own nation’s superiority. It also echoes a classic travel writing move, as the distancing is premised on the author’s mobility. In fact, it is

not a stretch to suggest that East Enders are frequently framed as despondent precisely because they lack mobility. In a classic naturalist move, London even posits that his home in the spacious American West—"with room under its sky and unlimited air for a thousand Londons" (24)—might offer the perfect antidote to the crowded East End, where denizens have no concept of "vacation" or "home," and "all the forces of [the] environment had tended to harden" them into views of "wretched, inevitable future[s]" (27).

Importantly, it is the labor of writing that allows London the distance of the traveler here, and it is in the labor of writing that a complicated traveler's class consciousness emerges. Travel serves as the rhetorical vehicle that amplifies the critique of the poverty he encounters, while it also constructs the author's Americanness and especially his American exceptionalism. The retreat to writing is complicated, as London, the increasingly committed socialist, wants to mark his class affinity with those he's observing, while London the soon-to-be-famous author, wants to distance himself from the poverty, self-consciously aware that it is writing that allows for this distance. In other words, he is carving out a place for writing as working class vocation, complete with all the hardships and hard work, and it is the travel-writing frame that enables him to keep the harsh poverty at arm's length. Travel writing conventions allow this delicate and complicated relationship to class politics to flourish in London's book. In short, I want to argue that London exposes the complicated class anxiety that will come to characterize sophisticated engagement with twentieth century travel experiences. Even as he denounces class hierarchy, that is, he affirms other hierarchies that are inherent to all leisure travel.

As we will see as we turn to Hemingway in the next section, this balance becomes trickier and trickier to maintain as the age of mass tourism flourishes. This calculus, where the traveler edges ever closer to the authentic local experience but never quite achieves local status,

becomes the central paradigm of independent travel. As the independent traveler moves to new places in search of experiences, he or she frames the quest in opposition to the canned mundane wanderings of the mass tourist, who is shuttled from here to there on a specific itinerary, usually to check off a list of sights, and then returned to the corporate-owned hotel. It is a distinction that remains today in both the industry and in popular perception, and it is saturated with tricky class politics. The independent traveler ideal is a chimera, of course, but seeking these experiences in some ways becomes the core ethic of American travel, regardless of how quixotic it might be.

Hemingway's Old Worlds

In many ways Hemingway has become a key cultural figure linked to authentic independent travel, even as he helped create tourist destinations like Pamplona and his travels now fuel a lucrative kitschy tourist trade in places like Havana and Key West. Hemingway arguably encouraged both of these cultural trends in his life and work, but he is much better known as a traveler than as a tourist.[5] As Russ Pottle notes in his entry on "Travel" for the book *Hemingway in Context*, modernists already committed to privileging high art and culture were particularly virulent in their disdain for tourists. Hemingway's commitment to authenticity made him even more predisposed to tourist bashing. *The Sun Also Rises* includes several notable examples—the aging couple from Montana on the southbound train out of Paris who applaud Jake and Mike for travelling as young men while chastising the hordes of Ohio pilgrims headed to Lourdes for clogging the dining car (91–92), for example, or the tourists in the big white motor car who miss the party in Pamplona, arriving too late to do anything but gawk at the town's massive hangover. In contrast, the novel's protagonist Jake Barnes—whom Pottle calls "Hemingway's most famous discretionary traveler" (370)—exemplifies the values and habits we now associate with true travel. He speaks the local languages, he laments when restaurants are listed in guidebooks and

overrun by Americans ("someone had put it in the American Women's Club list as a quaint restaurant on the Paris quais as yet untouched by Americans, so we had to wait forty-five minutes for a table" [82]), and he effectively helps his friends find what we might call an authentic "backdoor" travel experience with his access to local fishing hot spots, quiet beaches, and especially to bullfighting's key players in Pamplona. Jake, in short, is the consummate traveler, embodying the peripatetic expatriate lifestyle.

While the novel is perhaps best known as a portrait of the extravagance inherent to the lost generation's now famous rambles on the continent, Allyson Nadia Field makes a convincing case for reading the book alongside contemporary guidebooks to Europe. In Field's persuasive account, *The Sun Also Rises* is deeply indebted to a genre of travel guide that emphasized the experience and lifestyle, rather than the destination. In both the guidebooks and Hemingway's novel, the sights are background, while the drinking, sex, and mobility are the foreground. Field's extensive contextual research is convincing, as there is plenty of evidence that the novel owes much to travel writing conventions. Like the travel guides of the era, Hemingway's novel is rich with descriptive itineraries where *chic* cafes like the Select or Rotonde are named and evaluated according to the status of their regular customers, but not specifically located on a map; similarly, walks between locations are described with street names only, a rhetorical style that constructs the reader as insider who presumably already knows the streets and the scenes conjured by the names. *The Sun Also Rises* is an anti-guidebook guidebook. There are also humorous critiques of prevailing travel ideologies, too, like the dialogue early in the book in which Robert Cohn describes his desire to go to South America. Jake is skeptical, reminding Robert that "going to another country doesn't make any difference. I've tried all that. You can't get away from yourself by moving from one place to another. There's nothing to that" (19). This

is a travel book that is critical of travel by everyone save for the insiders and expatriates, who are figured as separate and distinct from their compatriots because they know how to make the right lifestyle choices without a guidebook. Robert Cohn is the book's foil, always on the margins of the insider group of expats for his failure to grasp the unwritten rules.

While Cohn's outsider status helps drives the narrative action, one of the novel's central tensions hinges on Jake's inability to fully experience this licentious and distinctly American expat lifestyle. Part of this is a function of his unnamed wound, no doubt, but it also the case that, unlike most of the characters in the book who are independently wealthy, Jake has to work, which frequently forces him to retreat from the action. Jake's occupation as Paris-based journalist marks him at once as an insider and outsider. Encountering tourist traps on the streets of Paris as he walks to the office, Jake declares that "it felt pleasant to be going to work," marking him as a local with a productive role to play in the community (43). Always dashing to the office to get a cable off or sitting down to "work hard" in the first section of the book, Jake is also self-consciously an outsider to his travelling expatriate friends. Several café conversations in this opening section of the book begin with some version of "How do you like Paris?"—clearly a visitor's refrain. Jake is never asked, nor does he ask this question, as he is both "one of them" and not one of them. Much of the melancholy of the book, in other words, hinges on Jake's perspective as both insider and outsider. Jake's status as writer gives him a privileged insider's perspective to local culture, but it also effectively distances him from the pure mobility of the other expats.

Like London in *The People of the Abyss,* Jake's status as writer helps him avoid some of the problems of being a purely hedonistic traveler. Jake notes, for example, that his work allows him an easy means to make graceful exits from social situations: "once you had a drink all you

had to say was: ‘well, I’ve got to get back and get off some cables’ and it was done” (19). While his work affords him certain social graces, it also creates internal conflicts for Jake. In fact, he reminds us that in the newspaper business, while one must certainly get the work done, “it is such an important part of the ethics that you should never seem to be working” (19). Just as Jake works without appearing to work, *The Sun Also Rises* is a guidebook that tries not to be a guidebook—notably, it is a guidebook that similarly argues that travelling without seeming to travel is a core ethic of American mobility. This ethic, I want to suggest, becomes the paradoxical ideal of the twentieth-century American independent traveler.

Situating Jake at the center of a book that draws heavily on travel narrative conventions, then, Hemingway, like London, figures the writer as a means to both understand the inherent class conundrums of travel, as well as a way to escape some of the most glaring class problems inherent in leisure travel. Although less central to the overall narrative than in London’s socialist treatise, social class matters immensely in *The Sun Also Rises.* Breeding and economics determines who has access to mobility. Jake both has and does not have access to this mobility—while he does seem to have a fair amount of discretionary time, he also has to earn a paycheck. This latter fact is highlighted when Jake checks his mail one evening after he leaves Brett and his friends still out on the town drinking. Returning to his apartment, he finds two letters from the United States, “one was a bank statement. It showed a balance of $2432.60. I got out my check-book and deducted four checks drawn since the first of the month and discovered I had a balance of $1832.60” (38). This is no small sum for the time period, but dwelling on finances at this level of detail, especially as his friends are still out drinking seemingly without a care in the world, suggests Jake must attend to his expenses in ways the others do not. Notably, the second piece of mail is a wedding announcement for some Americans he doesn’t know, and Jake speculates that

"they must be circularizing the town" (38). This juxtaposition of the two letters amplifies the fact that Jake is part of this community by address, but distant from it by economics. Indeed, the mail seems to augment Jake's angst, as the marriage announcement includes a crest, which leads him to again think about his unrequited love interest: "Brett had a title, too. Lady Ashley. To hell with Brett. To hell with you, Lady Ashley" (38). In short, while London's book seems to figure writing as a viable middle ground from which to negotiate concerns of social class while abroad, Hemingway's novel situates Jake's journalism much more ambivalently, as the vocation of writing does not allow Jake to escape the inherent class consciousness of travelling, suggesting that there might not in fact be any escape from this class tension that comes from travel.

As travel increasingly becomes the realm of leisure, and travel writing emerges as a literary genre in itself, both London and Hemingway's texts treat the development with ambivalence, marking their allegiance to a working-class ethos of labor. Their intervention in the cultural politics of travel—reminding us that social class always matters—helps define the core ethics that will inform how their compatriots will travel after them. The American travel industry's obsession with authentic local experiences is always mapped with class anxiety that we are not always interested in engaging while on vacation. Indeed, both London and Hemingway's travels coincide with what many consider the beginning of the our present era of globalization, a process set in motion by the vast colonial projects of European nations of the nineteenth century and that continues today through neo-colonial economic regimes. As we might expect from such sensitive readers of cultural nuance, London's and Hemingway's work reflects an important anxiety about the role travel plays in maintaining privilege in an increasingly globalized world—it is an anxiety we would do well to dwell on more frequently.

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widely on Ernest Hemingway and environmental issues, and has two collections of essays coming out in spring of 2017, *Teaching Hemingway and the Natural World*, and *Critical Norths: Nature, Space, Theory*, the latter co-edited with Sarah Jaquette Ray.

Notes

1. See Helen Carr for a discussion of Ford's use of this term.
2. More could certainly be said of their travel to decidedly colonial landscapes—where they seemingly distance themselves dramatically from tourism, offering pointed albeit limited critiques of the colonial project along the way—but focusing on London and Hemingway's "safe" writing about Europe where they engage more directly with the travel industry's expectations and ideologies allows us to think carefully about the nascent travel industry. For more on Hemingway's travel to Africa, see my essay "Hemingway's Ecotourism: *Under Kilimanjaro* and the Ethics of African Travel."
3. In *Abroad: British Literary Travelling between the Wars*, Paul Fussell asserts that travel became impossible as mass tourism blossomed following World War Two, suggesting that we are all always only "tourists" today because there are no more new cultures or places to encounter. Fussell actually posits three categories—explorer, traveler, and tourist—linking each to a historical era. As he puts it, "before tourism there was travel, and before travel there was exploration" (38), adding that "the explorer seeks the undiscovered, the traveler that which has been discovered by the mind working in history, the tourist that which has been discovered by entrepreneurship and prepared for him by the arts of mass publicity" (39). Fussell suggests that exploration belongs to the Renaissance, but that the distinction between travel and tourism was still contested in the early twentieth century. While Fussell is concerned with British authors, the distinction is useful, especially as he suggests it hinges on labor: in his estimation, travel requires work, while tourism is fundamentally about leisure.
4. *The People of the Abyss* is also illustrated with London's photographs of the East End people and environments he encounters. While ostensibly a vehicle for realistic representations of the poverty, Richard Stein points out that London's camera would have also created a certain critical distance from his subjects as well. A mode of representation that places technology between artist and subject that is hard to ignore, early twentieth-century photography was nothing if not invasive and expensive. Given the resources necessary not only to own, but especially to develop the film from a portable camera like London's Folding Pocket Kodak, Stein is probably right that the camera would betray London's disguise, clearly marking his outsider status. I would also point out that London's tool for realistically representing the East End only became portable as a function of the economy of scale created by a rapidly growing demand from travelers and tourists. London's photography is the subject a laudatory new book, Jeanne Reesman, and Sara Hodson, and Philip Adam's, *Jack London, Photographer*, but in Stein's critical assessment, the work linked to *The People of the Abyss* often more closely resembles "holiday photos than social records" (592).
5. The *New York Times* opinion editors were clearly thinking of the first Hemingway when they asked an international array of experts "where would Hemingway go?" aiming to explore "which city is the dynamic center of Europe today?" In this July 2011 post to the online discussion forum "Room for Debate," Hemingway's name serves as the signifier for a traveler who found the city "designated as the magnet of

creativity, energy and ideas" ("Where Would"). In my 2012 essay "'A Trick Men Learn in Paris': Hemingway, *Esquire*, and Mass Tourism," however, I make the case that Hemingway's 1930s essays in the popular men's magazine suggest he was always both traveler and tourism promoter. Hemingway's travel essays, I suggest, ultimately illuminate the paradox of modern travel, as he seems to want both the tourist luxury and difficult local authentic experiences. Hemingway seems uncomfortably to embrace the duality in the *Esquire* essays, I argue, establishing a core tension for American travelers not unlike the class tension I am arguing his novel and London's book both explore.

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